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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SA'ADA: WITH PLANES AND TANKS, ROYG SIGNALS SIXTH
ROUND OF FIGHTING

REF: SANAA 560

Classified By: DCM Angie Bryan for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY. The spread of violent clashes across Sa'ada, al-Jawf and the Saudi border and confluence of the Houthi rebellion with tribal and sectarian conflict in the region has finally drawn the ROYG into what now appears to be the sixth round of fighting. After several months of sporadic clashes between pro-government and pro-Houthi elements, on August 11 the Yemeni military launched aerial strikes and a ground assault against Houthi strongholds. The pre-Ramadan offensive, however, is unlikely to put a quick end to the fighting, especially if the government's stale promises of security and development for the people of Sa'ada remain unfulfilled. END SUMMARY.

ROYG PUNCHES BACK WITH AN "IRON FIST"

12. (S/NF) After weeks of rumors of an impending ROYG offensive, Yemeni troops backed by tanks staged attacks against Houthi strongholds across Sa'ada and conducted aerial bombardments of Houthi positions in al-Eind, Dahyan, Matrah, al-Malaheedh, Mahadher, Kharfji, Hasama, Bani Moath, al-Anad and al-Kahra districts. Local media reported that at least 15 people were killed on August 11-12. Houthi media reported that MIG jets were "targeting civilians as they traveled to the market." The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) reported that, as of August 10, the ROYG had added two companies of T-54/55 tanks to the Marib Barracks near Sana'a. The Central Security Forces (CSF) have increased the alert status at their Sa'ada compound. DAO contacts confirmed heightened levels of jet activity at Sana'a Airport, and reported that, as of August 12, the Yemeni Air Force (YAF) ground support crew had not slept in over 24 hours because of the level of support needed for the aerial campaign in Sa'ada. In an August 11 statement, the Ministry of Defense (MOD) said, "The State will undertake its responsibilities (under the law) to beat (the Houthis) with an iron fist until they surrender themselves to justice." On August 12, independent media outlet NewsYemen quoted Houthi spokesman Saleh Habra as saying, "We fear neither the government's missiles nor America. We derive our strength from Allah." Habra also said the ROYG's recent military operation was "empowered by America."

13. (S) Confounding observers in Sana'a, the renewed fighting occurred just two days after independent media reported that a truce had been reached between the ROYG and the Houthi rebels, and three days after the Houthis reportedly released 24 soldiers as a goodwill gesture. President Ali Abdullah Saleh told the Ambassador on August 9, "We have halted the war from our side and are not ready to fight on different

fronts." According to Mohammed Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs and a founding member of the Believing Youth, government officials and private citizens who benefit from the conflict want it to continue. Azzan told PolOff on August 5 that ROYG hawks include Northwest Regional Commander Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, Minister of Interior Mutaheer Rashad al-Masri and Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Rashad al-Alimi. The opposition Yemeni Socialist Party's (YSP) al-Ishtiraki newspaper reported on August 9 that "powerful army officers in the Northwestern region" rejected the August 7 truce and "gave military orders to escalate bombing." On the Houthi side, it's unclear how much central control leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi exercises over his supporters. "The Houthis aren't an organized army. They're just average people with guns," Zaydi imam Yahya al-Dailami told PolOff on July 29.

GEOGRAPHIC AND IDEOLOGICAL SPREAD

¶4. (SBU) After several months of quiet following the ROYG's unilateral ceasefire in July 2008, intermittent clashes between the ROYG and pro-Houthi militants have occurred since March. Government newspaper 26 September reported that 300 civilians were killed and 200 injured during the first six months of 2009. (Note: Neither the Houthis nor the ROYG release statistics of military personnel killed during fighting. End Note.) In a new development in the five-year conflict, the fighting spread this summer to neighboring al-Jawf governorate and even spilled across Yemen's northern border with Saudi Arabia. According to media reports, the Houthis, who already control more than 70 percent of Sa'ada, took control of more territory in July and August, including

key army posts near the al-Malahidh Saudi border crossing. London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat reported on August 10 that Houthis had cut off the Sana'a-Sa'ada road, standing up checkpoints as far south as Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate), less than 100km from Sana'a.

¶5. (S) After five years of fighting, Sa'ada's citizenry and tribes have become increasingly polarized along ROYG-Houthi lines (reftel). Minor disagreements between tribes have become wrapped up in the larger conflict, ICRC Head of Delegation Jean-Nicolas Marti told the Ambassador on August 15. Too, 2009 has witnessed armed conflict between Shiite Zaydis (including the Houthis) and hard-line Sunni Salafis. The Believing Youth movement, which spawned the Houthi rebellion, was founded in Sa'ada in the 1990s as a response to the aggressive growth of Salafism in the traditionally Zaydi region. Ongoing activity at the extremist Damaj Institute and the recent kidnapping and execution of Westerners rumored to be proselytizing in Sa'ada have sparked fears of a creeping Salafi presence among the local Zaydi population. (Note: ROYG forces have mounted a separate offensive in northern Sa'ada against what it believes are extremist elements holding the Western hostages. End Note.) An August 9 AFP report described fighting between Houthis and "Salafists" in Baqim (Sa'ada) that left eight dead. The media also reported on Shiite-Sunni clashes in late July over control of a mosque in Zahra (Sa'ada).

LOSING HEARTS AND MINDS

¶6. (S) The ROYG's recent bombing campaign continues the trend of collective punishment against the people of Sa'ada that has turned many average citizens against the government. "The government has lost the people. They have left every promise unfulfilled," Dailami said. The ICRC's Marti said that the ROYG's Sa'ada Reconstruction Fund (SRF) began paying some reparations for damage inflicted during fighting in 2008, but both the SRF and the Sa'ada Mediation Committee (SMC) have largely suspended activities since April 2009. General People's Congress (GPC) Member of Parliament Abdulsalam al-Zabia and three other GPC MPs from Sa'ada resigned from the party in late July, citing "unfulfilled promises" from the ROYG regarding security and development in

Sa'ada. Zabia told PolOff on July 22 that Sa'ada Governor Hassan Manna changed SRF recommendations to suit his own priorities. Relief organizations working in the area estimate that there are at least 10,000 IDPs in Sa'ada, with more people fleeing the fighting in recent weeks. The UNHCR, Islamic Relief and the ICRC struggle to provide them with accommodation, clean water and basic medical services, Khalid al-Mulad of Islamic Relief told Polff on August 5.

COMMENT

17. (S) Despite the ROYG's stated reluctance to engage the Houthis in another round of fighting, it appears that the Sixth War has begun. The general population's lingering resentment, Houthis' fatal attacks on security forces and confluence of the ROYG-Houthi conflict with tribal and sectarian conflicts in the region have pushed the ROYG past its tipping point. If past is precedent, the quick end to the latest round of fighting that President Saleh and his advisors are likely hoping for is unlikely to come. END

COMMENT.

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